The poet and the politics: Danilo Kiš beyond yogi and the commissar

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The Balkans is not only a mountainous peninsula in the southeastern Europe, lacking the natural borders with Western

century, who, in turn, followed in the footsteps of an earlier Turkish cartographer. In the last two centuries of war and violently shifting borders under the pressure of Habsburg and Ottoman empires, amply assisted by the Western great powers and Russia, the Balkans became a convenient metaphor, too. It became a metaphor for a particular *forma mentis*, for a savage and primeval mentality, not subjected to the sway of modern reason, a mentality whose metastases can infest "healthy" civilization in the world of global capitalism.

Balkanization of a given community is today predominantly a slur word, suggesting narcissistic fragmentation of large collectives into ever smaller splinter groups that assert themselves in bloodshed and cruel hatred, in cunning moralism of purity and in ritual evocation of ancient rights. "European" habits of life and mind are not immediately available here, in the Balkans.

Where is, however, »here, in the Balkans«? Does it begin on the southern side of the terrace of Hotel Esplanade in Zagreb, as Miroslav Krleža, the leading modern Croatian writer, pointedly remarked? Is its doorstep really to be found in dingy *gastarbeiter* taverns around Southern Railway Station in Vienna, as the tabloids of Austrian pettite-bourgeoisie inveigh day after day? Does the Balkans begin on the southern bank of the river Kolpa

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that separates Slovenia from Croatia, as major part of Slovenian public is wont on arrogantly believing?

The marker setting apart the stable and orderly society from tribal passions is but an imaginary one. It can be moved around in keeping with the changing need of communities to make sense of their identity in flux, though the consequences of these shifts affect both sides of the divide. Modern image of the Balkans has namely emerged as a result of manifold conceptual mutations, where colonizing Western narratives of the other, different and distinct often went hand in glove with the pursuit of the native, ethno genetically original, and superior anti-Western culture of Balkan virility.

There is, however, a cultural tradition that allowed for an intense trafficking in ideas, attitudes, and symbols across the linguistic and ethnic borders, a tradition of cosmopolitanism. This tradition between the two world wars may have been thin, but it did include the historical avant-garde movement with the genuine Balkan twist, *Zenitism*: Ljubomir Micić skillfully edited it for five years. His *Zenit* magazine read a bit like a catalogue of German Expressionism and Russian Constructivism while his original idea of "Barbarogenius", an authentic Balkan man who will in his creative zenith inject fresh blood into decaying Europe, perfectly captured the popular belief that Balkan peoples are unsullied with the corrupt European intellect. There was a trembling cadence of redeeming prophesy in the voice of Slovenian poet Srečko Kosovel who was influenced by Zenitism; there were elegant meditations on the passing of time in the poems of a Croatian poet Tin Ujević; and the fatalistic acceptance of misfortune in Ivo Andrić whose work claim Serbs, Croats and Bosnians alike. But none of these writers continues to exert such a powerful pull to my feverish imagination than the work of Danilo Kiš.

Danilo Kiš (1935-1989), a fiction writer, prolific translator and charismatic bon-vivant was a liberator from under the yoke of social realism, the official aesthetics of post-WWII Yugoslav art. His cultural background was animated by Jewish, Serbian, and Hungarian traditions as he wrote at the crossroads of Austro-Hungarian and Balkan heritage. The child of Jorge Luis Borges and Bruno Schulz, he consciously reached outside of his

mother tongue, the language that was until 1991 known as "Serbo-Croatian". He reached instead for his literary fathers the better to underscore his freedom of imaginative choice.

Yet, Danilo Kiš was by no means free of moral allegiances as he self-consciously embraced the designation of "the last Yugoslav writer" which implied his ceaseless resistance to nationalist ideology. I was guided, however, by his no less relevant recognition that it is precisely a writer's calling to sustain an existential necessity that can and should reject the alluring delusions of "free-floating" internationalism.

A writer whose home is in his mother tongue is aware that the language is not only an instrument of communication. It is instead a metaphysical worldview. If "free floating" internationalism assumes that a person may be fully at home in a transnational social class which demands the renunciation of immediate ethnic and cultural ties in the name of communist loyalty, I wanted to believe that it is possible to remain faithful to the primordial realms of intimate geography, history, and community even as one fosters links to global cultural movements. Defying both the rigidity of nationalist navel-gazing and the blithe nonsense of "global citizenship," I have attempted to trace the concentric circles of identity that emanate from images of the self embedded in communal experience and ripple through the currents of local, national, and regional identities.

This identity is revealed only to that particular gaze that has a transformative power to erode the locally entrenched descriptions of everyday life, gradually turning them into stories of universal meaning. This is the gaze of the masters, artists and writers in whose work a mature reflection travels in the same compartment as the commitment to a chosen community that differs from one's ethnic or linguistic group. Such cosmopolitan perspective indeed necessitates one's individual choice, as it transcends an organically grounded membership. It necessitates a choice of a membership in an elusive community in which an imperative to be human is not a given right alone, but a responsibility as well.

What can possibly protect all of us, who want to participate in the kind of life in which the idea of a common humanity has

not yet completely withered away, is perhaps only a frail hope that the critical attitude toward fashionable ideologies offers at the same time a resistance to status quo and prevents us from fatalist acceptance of evil as an inalienable aspect of experience.

Danilo Kiš was a writer-hero for me. With his moral insistence that the central question for writers of twentieth century was the question of camps, Auschwitz and Gulag; with his lyrical procedures that accommodated both, the reveries over the litany of provincial railway stations and the tremor of an anxious soul; with his claim that kitsch is indestructible like a plastic bottle; with his resigned, yet not defeatist understanding of the fact that to him, having lived his last decade of life in a voluntary Parisian exile, contemporary French intellectual debates were familiar while the debates of his native realm remained alien to his French peers; with his persistence in a belief that literature is being written with the totality of one's being, not only with the language alone, which made him cling to his Serbo-Croat literary idiom despite the false comforts of French, the adopted language of exile's everyday life; with his principled attitude of a "wandering Jew" who cannot be oblivious to the destructive consequences of schauvinist elevation of "chosen nation to the level of metaphysical Idea which, in turn, justifies any and all means to advance its protection; with the comprehensive narrative of his life and work, Danilo Kiš for me represented the most noble accomplishment of the Balkan imagination.

I had discovered Danilo Kiš early in the 1980s, when, as a student at the Ljubljana University, Slovenia, I shared with Kiš a larger home of Yugoslavia. My having come across his stories was something of a revelation as his work was not canonized yet. In fact, in the wake of a publication of his collection of short stories, *The Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (first published in 1976; two years later, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published the English translation), a vociferous controversy erupted over the proper use of literary methods. Kiš became subject to public character-assassination and harassment by communist cronies that ultimately resulted in his emigration.

Danilo Kiš went into exile of Paris. I went into exile of his books. Two decades later, I am still its happy denizen. I

continue to draw sustenance from Kiš, never more than in the pre-apocalyptic world in which little European themes of national divisions and their attendant separation between "us" and "them" assume fearfully global incarnation in the American-British occupation of Iraq. Of course, to contemplate in such times the spirit of the library as a repository of a sense of community is to indulge in literary daydreaming. Yet, such are the consolations of imagination that I cannot not daydream over my master.

In his work, notably in a story *Encyclopedia of the Dead* (first published in 1983; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux published the English translation in 1989), Danilo Kiš exploited the metaphor of a particular kind of library. Where there's a literary library, there's Jorge Luis Borges's library. It was Borges's metafictional strategy that made Kiš exclaim that all literature is divided into "the one before Borges and the one after him". This claim is debatable, but the fact remains that Borges strongly affected Kiš's literary use of documents, chronicles, and fact-based references. Plowing through their respective truths, Kiš created fictional works of highest aesthetic order. Borges devised a metaphor of a library whose aim was to be the universe. In his story *The Library of Babel* (1941), the library is an enormous one as it contains the infinity of all past, present and future events. Borges's conception of the library assimilates past, present, and the future. Borges' library is as unlimited as is anxiety of the people who look in vain for an explanation of the chaos in the orderly rows of bookshelves.

Kiš was impressed, but not content. He chose a sharp, passionate and doubtless a polemically pregnant rendition of this trope in his *Encyclopedia of the Dead*. First, Kiš's encyclopedia, the quintessential book of the library, is open only to those people who are already dead. Second, the selective mechanism is at work even within a community of the dead as Kiš's library excluded those whose names have already merited an inclusion in any other book, lexicon, or library.

The people who have made it into none of the *Who's Who* have thus found their sole recognition in the genuine encyclopedia of the dead, the encyclopedia of the nameless, the accidental passers-by, the people next door. This

methodological gesture is nothing else but a celebration of equalising power of death. It is a kind of macabre reminder for the ignored principle of freedom, brotherhood and equality.

I'm not saying that in the time of constant social perturbations Kiš plays only a role of a charitable servant whose job is to relieve a pain. After all, the pain forces us to think, thinking can evolve into wisdom, and wisdom makes life somewhat bearable. What I am saying is that the radical subversion of the fantasy of equality is Kiš's original contribution to the understanding of modern human condition: the equality of the dead continues to be marked with concrete social relations that marked people's lived experience. In other words, the divisive political beliefs and separating social statuses of individuals follow them beyond the grave.

The logic of the encyclopedia's entries is connected with a certain kind of exfoliating hermeneutics. The web of events, the lullabies sung by the deceased, the relatives and wedding guests, the postmen of feather-light feet and scruffy milkmaids, the web of all the people the deceased used to see, know or smell is endless. But isn't this lamely said? The web that an individual is caught in is after all so extensive that it literally captures the entire world, for every person sooner or later crosses paths with the person who has been in touch with the deceased man's acquaintance.

As the web branches out to include the relatives and relatives of the relatives as well as acquaintances and casual encounters, the assumption of the encyclopedia of the dead is ultimately liberating: it intimates that we are connected with all living and dead things and people in the world. The labyrinth, the impossible-to-untangle yarn of links, running horizontally and vertically, this labyrinth is so vast that during my first reading of Kiš's story I had a thrilling sense of resemblance to that exceptionally accurate map of England which is actually England itself, as Josiah Royce reported in his book *The World and the Individual* (1899). His map welcomed a constant repetition *ad infinitum*, for every map of England must contain itself and thus progressively accumulates multitudes of its own image.

Kiš's encyclopedia, however, is the multitude that is always already there. In Kiš's brilliant rendition, the vocabulary of entries is metamorphosed from the linear quality of the written record, which sets laws to our everyday speech and chronological life, into a simultaneous presence of many slices of life the deceased suffered through. In a few sentences, the entire history of an individual is condensed, summarized and described; it is described not only in a tedious perspective of information regarding birth, education, marital status, addresses changed and jobs held, but rather with an artistic sensibility that calls out to the most ambitious of ideals, the totality of being.

A secret project of Stephane Mallarme's *the Book* shines through this unfulfilled desire to sing the totality of being, to live the totality of song. Mallarme, the founder of French Symbolism, in late 19th century deified the language and its potential for a dream-like synthesis in which all self-division is overcome and "all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in the book". Mallarmé, to be sure, never wrote the Book. His maxim that everyone and everything that occurs in the world must one day arrive into the Book, however, received not only aesthetically beautiful but also socially sensitive recuperation under the trembling pen of Danilo Kiš, my Balkan master. In the footsteps of his eponymous story I dared to compose the following tribute, a paraphrase, a form of gratitude:

Story of Master and Disciple

from Prague dawns and bluish gloom,
as heavy as a pigeon death in Saturday idleness,
from a faded book which I dare not open
for I know it by heart, imitating the universe,
from a symmetry of fourty years and six books
that were written by my many selves in despair,
from love, from courtyard dust, from poems read through
in one single breath, from two or three neologisms,
from patience and discipline, which tricles into my lungs,
from impotence and a sour taste of repetition,

from faith in thirty-six wise men,
from the first Talmud lesson,
from hazy visions and failed allusions,
from eternal solitude and equal pride,
from courage and a lark's useless song,
from unpleasant memories of the Pygmalion myth
more alive today than ever, from a story
inserted into somebody else's story and maybe even less
successful than the original, which is itself but
a bad chronicle of a legend that came to pass
countless times, from the arrogance of the master
blind for worn-out metaphors and student confidence,
from hunches and nonsense, from the game the read-through
book is playing with me, from the master's insistence
that he must feel the burning pain of conceit if
he wants to give a lesson about its danger,
from reflections and shadows in the mirrorless room,
from wisdom and subdued voices from the past I cannot
write a story which will be years from now dreamt up
by a man as devoted to reading and writing
as myself. I do not know if this man will be me again.